

REMARKS BY THE HONORABLE SOLOMON P. ORTIZ
REGARDING: Testimony on S. Texas Vets hospital
April 26, 2007

Mr. Chairman, thank you for this opportunity to speak on behalf of South Texas veterans and help this subcommittee understand the urgent need for a veterans' hospital for the men and women who fought for us.

Here with me today are members of the Veterans alliance of the Rio Grande Valley – so you can see the faces of the South Texans affected by the lack of a hospital... the Rio Grande Valley is the southernmost tip of my district.

Here with me are: Jose Maria Vasquez, Ruben Cordoba, and Max Balamaris, Polo Uresti, Frank Albiar, and Mr. Felix Rodriguez.

My legislation gives the government flexibility in establishing a way to deal with hospital services in South Texas... but the only real solution for the area is a hospital.

Bottom line: veterans' in-patient health care must be available where the veterans live, not several hours away.

These guys have fought, bled and sacrificed for this nation – they need something that belongs to them ... a hospital that get's them the care they need where they live – not 5 hours away.

We know the VA plays the numbers game – but the numbers do not reflect the need... particularly in the Rio Grande Valley.

When the VA commissioned their CARES study they recognized the Far South Texas area was in need of acute inpatient care.

They decided to meet this demand through contracting or leasing beds in local communities, an approach simply not working.

Veterans are still traveling in large numbers to Audie Murphy in San Antonio for care, and for many who are treated for emergencies at area hospitals, the bills go unpaid by VA.

Many veterans are so disgusted by the level of VA health services, they simply do not sign up for VA health care.

You have heard me describe the conditions of South Texas Vets; today I want to show you experiences of veterans themselves ... veterans who shed blood for our nation ... veterans whose health care is utterly inferior.

South Texas veterans regularly travel five hours there and back to a 15 minute appointment that took months to get.

Sometimes they need to stay overnight in San Antonio... sometimes, veterans find after the strenuous trip, their appointment has been canceled.

We've scrubbed the names to prevent any retaliation for truth telling.... And my time will run out before I'm done, but want you to hear the stories I hear

A 21-year-old Iraq war veteran came home badly wounded in his spine.

He's now at Audie Murphy in San Antonio.

He was being moved by hospital staff from the bed to a wheelchair – but they moved too quickly and damaged his spine even more.

He has a lifetime of going back and forth to San Antonio for treatment ... and his family has a lifetime of committing to take him there regularly.

One veteran underwent emergency heart surgery; his wife called the local clinic and she was directed to call 911; he was admitted for the emergency surgery locally.

His benefits coordinator told him to follow up with a local cardiologist to chart his progress since there wasn't a cardiologist at the clinic.

He did, but VA did not pay and on the 3rd visit, the cardiologist's office told him to pay up front for all services. The VA clinic then told him he should have gone to a cardiologist in San Antonio.

By now, his sutures were infected and leaking.

Eventually, he got an appointment to see a VA cardiologist 5 weeks later.

The stress from all this prompted his psychiatrist to increase the dosage on his meds.

When he got to San Antonio, the cardiologist was surprised to learn he had surgery.

He was prescribed more high blood pressure medication.

That made him faint from low blood pressure, panicking his wife ... she called a home health nurse who suggested stopping all meds and going immediately to the hospital.

He did not want to go the hospital because they had not been paid and he might be refused.

He was poor – so the nurse recommended that he drink a coca cola with crackers, which helped temporarily.

Due to a faulty medical records system, he was prescribed too much medication.

Since then, he travels to San Antonio to monitor his heart.

He travels five hours, has a 10 minute procedure done, and once was told to return in 48 hours.

He did not qualify for lodging so he returned to the Valley.

After two days he returned for a procedure that took under 5 minutes.

That equals 2 trips to San Antonio in 2 days ... traveling about 25 hours ... to be seen a total of 15 minutes.

A retired disabled veteran is in the midst of several surgeries to correct service injuries, in numerous visits to San Antonio, the nearest VA hospital to the Valley.

When he had shoulder surgery, he spent the night in his car so the anesthesia could wear off... and he didn't take any pain medication so he could make the four hour drive back home...

He had to stop several times along the way to vomit from the pain.

He also had to sleep once slept in his car in San Antonio to make an early appointment because by the time he arrived in San Antonio all the rooms available for veterans had been taken.

A constituent's brother had a triple by pass done in San Antonio Audie Murphy Veterans Hospital in 2005.

During the course of his recovery at home, he developed complications that needed to be monitored closely.

The VA medical provider told him that he needed to be monitored closely; then later that day, got a call from the

VA Clinic that he needed to go to the nearest hospital taking Veterans.

Once there, he was moved by ambulance to another area hospital, where he was admitted after advising the hospital he was a Veteran and showed his ID Card.

The hospital got the clearance from San Antonio VA and admitted him.

His medical bills there have not been paid because the VA is claiming that “VA facilities were feasibly available to provide the care.”

The VA said his brother could have traveled to San Antonio under the dangerous medical problems he was having.

His brother does not want to “rock the boat” because of his heart condition and other medical problems.

In a sense, he is held hostage by our government.

A family member said this: Congress should also hear about the hardship that the vet's family must also endure.

She has a full time job but must miss work, taking leave, to take a loved one to San Antonio.

She cannot let him go by himself whenever they do procedures that require anesthesia or manipulation of his neck or spine.

He is usually in so much pain and/or drowsy with medication that he cannot drive.

He has a hard time sitting for long periods, and San Antonio is 5 hours away.

They must also make arrangements for the kids if they are not getting back before school's out.

A couple of times he's had to go alone because she couldn't leave work or find another driver.

Then she is so worried about him driving that she cannot function at work, going out several times to call to make sure he is OK.

She also notes the travel pay is woefully insufficient, given gas prices.

They have to fill up twice to get there and back, plus pay for meals.

She notes that hospitalized vets would be better off near friends and family to keep them in good spirits.

A Vietnam vet still being treated for post-traumatic stress disorder; has two sons, both active-duty military, who have served multiple tours in Iraq.

After a late-night phone call from a son saying that he'd been hurt in an IED explosion, his Post Traumatic Stress surfaced ... when he called to see the psychiatrist, he was told the soonest appointment was in six months.

The district director for the Veterans of Foreign Wars in the Valley says VA provides good medical care.

The doctors and staff do the best they can with what they have.

The problem is getting into the system to get the care.

He says, “We believe we've earned the right to see a doctor where we live.”

Veteran and State Rep. Aaron Peña says what isn't spoken is the sense that they are being ignored despite the long history of Hispanics' service to the U.S. military.

We've fought in almost every American war ... and we're still being ignored.

The disabilities of a Port Isabel veteran who served 2 tours in Viet Nam are made worse by a round trip on a crowded van, and an overnight stay in a dirty hotel.

14 months ago he went to a private emergency room, which then sent him by ambulance to San Antonio to treat a kidney infection.

VA still has not paid for the emergency visit – ironically today, April 26, is his deadline to pay the local hospital \$10,000 since VA won't pay.

An Iraq veteran is haunted by some of the terrible things he saw in combat leading to depression and thoughts of suicide.

His friend got him to go to the VA office ... where he was referred to the VA hospital in Waco for evaluation for post-traumatic stress.

He was told him he needed to begin regular sessions, and said he'd get an appointment in the mail.

Three weeks later, he got a letter from VA that he could see the doctor in eight months.

Another veterans notes: "It's hard to hold a job when you have to miss work four or five times a month to travel to San Antonio for medical appointments."

One veteran has utilized the V.A. health care systems in Reno, Nevada and Fargo, North Dakota, and he reports both were very good.

Conversely, his experience with the clinics in Harlingen and McAllen are “ongoing nightmares.”

Lately he’s been trying to get an appointment with the psychiatrist in Harlingen.

Every time he calls, he’s put on hold and eventually hangs up after waiting and waiting.

He was not alone among veterans who suspect some manner of “federal racism” when our nation is only anxious to send border patrol agents, but no hospital to treat military veterans who live here.

A daughter who misses her dad says her father served in the U.S. Army and came home needing psychological care catered to what a veteran experiences – and taking into consideration the stigma a Hispanic man feels with depression.

She lost her father to suicide and wishes that care was available.

Another veteran learned the VA now accepted that Agent Orange could have affected sailors in the Tonkin Gulf. The VA did not respond to him since he was not a “wounded veteran.”

He also has diabetes for which they will not treat him. He believes they want to wait until he cannot care for himself at all rather than helping him prevent the devastation of diabetes while he can.

A former military wife said her ex husband and daughter now live in San Antonio and her son has plans of retiring there too – merely to be closer to military medical facilities. Veterans are forced to choose between living near home and family, or living near health care.

Another veteran notes many Soldiers from the Valley can not afford the trip, much less the expense it takes to visit these facilities.

He notes many veterans have died never getting the Medical attention they needed.

He calls the VA health system in South Texas a “disastrous situation.”

A former sergeant says: the cruel irony of extra stress on various disabilities caused by traveling 5 hours to a VA hospital makes conditions even worse.

And like several others I heard from, he issued an invitation for any of my colleagues here today to join them the 5 hour ride to SA in the van.

A retired Major notes local access would promote early diagnosis and early cure for ailments that would otherwise generate higher treatment costs if left untreated.

He also has the novel suggestion of using hospital ships as a veteran's hospital.

A retired Air Force sergeant – who is covered by Tricare benefits – knows he is lucky to have access to local Medical facilities.

Always a soldier, he volunteered to drive the van to San Antonio.

He would drive from Raymondville to Brownsville to pick up veterans at 6 a.m. then to San Benito then Harlingen and then back Raymondville, where the actual trip to San Antonio commenced.

He reiterated what many people said: It's not a straight 5 ½ hour trip since they had to stop various times for rest rooms breaks.

And he was prohibited from helping the vets in and out of the van out of liability concerns.

Most Veterans he drove had to wait hours to be seen for just a 15 minute visit, then they began the long trek back.

The widow of a Vietnam-era vet said he died nine years ago of a heart attack and almost certainly from a lung problem associated with his exposure to Agent Orange.

He never pursued a diagnosis because the San Antonio facility was too far and he was not able to make the trip.

The one time he did for hearing loss from a mortar concussion while in Viet Nam, he found that the number of people they were trying to serve was too great for quality care.

He never went back again.

A Captain with the 1st Cav in Iraq was wounded in 2003 by an IED that ruptured both ears drums and left his right side littered with pieces of shrapnel, many still remain.

He plans to retire in the next 4 years.

He said he's gotten good treatment while on active duty, but worries about the time when he retires, and no local VA Hospital in the area.

He talks regularly with local Veterans that can not afford to make the drive to San Antonio because they can't afford the gas or can't drive or have no one to take them.

Another veteran echoes many voices in saying south Texas veterans should be treated by local medical resources.

He lives in Corpus Christi, but worries about what the cost of transportation does to an aging veteran's population with higher poverty rates in the Rio Grande Valley.

Extended trips place unnecessary physical stress on veterans, it places a financial burden on valley veterans and their families as well.

He sustained a head injury, which resulted in a visible dent in the skull.

After headaches and memory issues, the V.A. physician sent him to Audie Murphy for a CT Scan; and he had no option but to drive the 300 mile round trip to the V. A. facility.

That trip not only put him at risk, but the safety of other drivers as well.

Another veteran invites all of us to come experience the long and painful ride from South Texas to San Antonio to visit a doctor.

A South Texan speaks on behalf of friends married to veterans; she is incensed that for health care they must be inconvenienced financially (gas, food, overnight stays for vets and families) and time-wise, which interferes with their jobs.

The brother of a constituent is medically retired from the Air Force and must travel to San Antonio every month for his medical treatments.

It takes a day out of his life and requires a long ride back and forth.

Another retired veteran chooses the expense of private care over the time it takes waiting at the local clinic or taking the time to travel to San Antonio.

Another veteran also speaks to the trouble and time consuming nature of going so far for procedures.

He knows that by the time you arrive your problems just seem to increase.

A Corpus Christi Veteran laid out the context of getting treatment in San Antonio: she said it is a 12 hour ordeal to get to San Antonio, get tended to at Audie Murphy, and return home.

It costs 2 gas tanks and a whole day of work. The \$26.00 dollars for travel does not cover nearly the cost.

Placido Salazar, State Veterans' Affairs Officer of The American GI Forum of Texas tells me that Valley were recently in San Antonio for three days of appointments; they told him that a manager at the associated hotel would not release a room to them until 6:00pm, (using very abusive language); with one of the veterans not getting a meal in more than 24 hours.

ADDENDA – LETTERS AND STORIES OF SOUTH TEXAS VETERANS

Last week, some veterans from The Valley that were in San Antonio for three days of appointments at Audie Murphy called me to inform me that one of the managers at the Oak Hill Hotel on Wurzbach Rd had given them a hard time, in not releasing a room to them until 6:00PM, (using very abusive language) with one of the veterans not getting a meal in more than 24 hours.

THAT is totally unacceptable, but I believe we got the situation corrected. If anybody else should have trouble at that hotel or any other type of problem, I will be glad to try to assist. Just call me, any day –

any time (210) 658-9756.

Placido Salazar, State Veterans' Affairs Officer of The American GI Forum of Texas (210) 658-9756.

My father served in the U.S. Army and came home to marry the girl next door, raise a family consisting of four kids but never truly felt at peace because he suffered from what he was exposed to while he was in the Army.

He needed psychological care catered to what a veteran experiences taking into consideration the stigma a Hispanic man must deal with for feeling depressed.

He ended up committing suicide years later leaving us all behind to miss him dearly. Please build a complete Veterans Hospital in the Valley, our veterans deserve and need it.

Thank you,
Army Veterans Daughter

I am a veteran here in south Texas and would be willing to go to Washington next week, now in order to prepare the congressman for his testimony.

I live on a fixed income but will drive if I have to be there.

I am sure I can get at least 2 other vets from here to go with me. please call me ASAP to speak of this.

thanks,
Lydia

Congressman Ortiz,

It is with great pleasure and honor that I congratulate you for your efforts to bring a Veterans Hospital to South Texas. While South Texas is one of the home of many heroes who have given their lives in foreign wars for the sake of freedom in America, South Texas remains one of the poorest areas in the nation where veterans have difficulties finding jobs and medical care. As a navy veteran of the Vietnam War, I served on a destroyer for several months in the Tonkin Gulf and also in an expedition to the Sea of Japan during the USS Pueblo incident where the North Koreans boarded one of our ships and took our men prisoners.

At some point in my life I became diabetic while no one in my immediate family, father, mother, or grandparents) were diabetic. For ten years I have addressed diabetes on my own. One day a Vietnam vet friend told me that I could have been affected by agent orange even though I was aboard a destroyer and that the VA was now accepting that agent orange could have affected sailors in the Tonkin Gulf. I reported to the VA clinic in Corpus Christi and basically they did not respond to my request for nothing more than diabetic medication which is extremely expensive.

I am one of those individuals that will address health issues with or without VA assistance. However, my DD 214 clearly states that I served in the Tonkin Gulf and shows my veterans status, but somehow no one seemed to know what I was talking about when I visited the VA clinic in Corpus Christi. They told me they needed more documentation and that I was not a wounded veteran. Nevertheless, I was not looking for any kind of monetary compensation, but rather with help with medication for my diabetes only.

The thought occurred to me that one day I will probably need assistance from the VA hospital in San Antonio, but will not get it because I am not a wounded veteran, but have been afflicted with diabetes that may have occurred in the Tonkin Gulf. The VA made available benefits for veterans of the Tonkin Gulf, but no one at the VA clinic seems to know that.

While I have assisted many veterans by taking them for medical service at Audie Murphy, many were not wounded veterans. I suppose that they want to wait until I am unable to care for myself entirely to provide service if any instead of helping me know prevent the devastation of diabetes while I can now. I have seen many veterans struggle with transportation to San Antonio for service and as you well know I provided services for many senior citizens from Kleberg for many years that needed to go to Audie Murphy. Now I am one of them and a veteran who volunteered during the Vietnam War.

I know that many vets struggle getting to San Antonio from the coastal bend to receive services. A hospital closer to us would be appreciated by all veterans and in fact every region across America should have one more so than we need to spend money on expanding economic efforts than basically serve special interests like oil and uranium mining. I for one am disappointed with the reception I received at the Corpus Christi VA and surely I am not going to beg for their attention to my need and get kicked in the face every time I ask.

Hopefully, you will be successful in your bid for a VA hospital for veterans that is long overdue and maybe a revamping of existing VA clinics and services so that vets like myself who need assistance are not turned down because someone there does not understand what being aboard a destroyer in the Tonkin Gulf means.

I remain your friend and supporter of many years,

Ben Figueroa,BA,MA,LCDC,CPS,CPM

Dear Congressman Ortiz,

Thank you so very much in you support of our Veterans and their welfare. Though I am not a veteran but my daughter, son and ex husband are veterans along with other family members.

I feel that a Veteran's Hospital is greatly needed in the valley. My ex husband along with my daughter are now living in San Antonio and my son has plans of retiring there too. Why? You guessed it..... Military Medical facilities.

My ex husband was diagnosed with cancer along with other viet nam medical issues has had to leave his immediate family and move to San Antonio in order to be closer to medical assistance.

Thank you so much again for taking on this task. My prayers are with you.

Sincerely,

Beatrice Weaver

To whom it may concern;

My name is Jim Hodges Jr, am a Vietnam Veteran from Brownsville , Texas. Am the proud Past-Commander of America's Last Patrol Inc. Post-2. Am also the son and nephew of a couple WW11 veterans. Am also involved in trying to get the Veterans Hospital in the Rio Grande Valley.

My Relatives who served in WW11, Korea, Vietnam and every conflict our wonderful Country has ever been involved in. Have had and have an extremely hard time! getting the Medical attention that they earned. Many of my relatives and friends can not go to the VA Hospitals in Houston, San Antonio and or Fort Bliss. Most of these Soldiers are "POOR" and can not afford the trip much less the expense it takes to visit these facilities.

Many have past away never getting the Medical attention they needed. I am blessed that I can go to the VA here in the Houston area where I live. BUT, there are many in this area who can not.

That is why there is a "shuttle" to help those Veterans who can not afford it and or not able to drive, How can we expect our Veterans to make that 300 to 500 mile trip to a Veterans Hospital? Thank you for your help and attention to this "disastrous situation".

in service to our Country
Mr. Jim Hodges Jr.
832-228-2758

To whom it may concern !

My problem with VA health care are the extra stress on our disabilities cause by traveling 5 hours to a VA hospital. That is one way only .Also 24/7 medical care that is needed by service connected veterans. Let the Veterans Affairs committee come to the Rio Grande Valley and travel to SA on a van ?

Sgt James Krummel

April 21, 2007

Congressman Salomon Ortiz
3649 Leopard Street
Corpus Christi, Texas 78411

Subject: VA Hospital In South Texas

Dear Congressman Ortiz:

It is most encouraging to hear of your fight to provide the veterans of south Texas with a VA Hospital. Please allow me to offer some suggestions that may help. Among the most salient reasons for locating such a facility in this area are the following points:

1. Local access would enhance participation by some veterans who are discouraged by the travel distance to out-of-town VA facilities. This in turn would promote early diagnosis and early cure for ailments that would otherwise generate higher treatment costs if left untreated. Equally, it would also benefit those who are too seriously ill to tolerate the commuting stress. All of this would lead to more efficient expenditure of VA health care dollars.
2. With the Port of Corpus Christi's expanded terminal now able to handle large volume military hardware shipping, it lends itself to accept hospital ships that have become a major factor in saving military lives. At a time when America's freedoms are challenged in all parts of the globe, the ability to have a hospital facility that could accept large numbers of military patients from a waterborne hospital vehicle, would be strategically and economically prudent. It makes little sense to doc such a vehicle in outer ports and then air-transport the patients to inland hospitals. Corpus Christi could service all of that need in one location, and could easily provide contingency plans for expansion in national emergencies. Also, the government could save by incorporating the ancillary services such as lab, x-ray, and pharmacy, in a location that could handle both active and retired military personnel. This would provide economy of scale in areas of high cost medical technology, which is a primary reason for escalating health costs.
3. A large VA hospital facility would help mend the region's physician shortage. Logically, some VA Physicians serving the region would elect to remain here in private practice. This would provide relief in Medicare services, such as rheumatology

(among other specialities), that are heavily skewed to a narrow panel of physicians who accept and treat Medicare patients in this region. Again, this would deliver Medicare budget economies by early diagnosis and treatment.

The above three points are only a sample of the issues that stress a need for a VA hospital in this region. I truly hope you are successful in your effort. If I can be of further assistance, please do not hesitate to call upon me. I can be reached at 361-993-6905.

With best personal regards,

John D. Falcon

John D. Falcon

Major, USA (Ret.)

Dear Congressman Ortiz,

I myself a veteran retired of 20 years serving in the U. S. Air Force which I do not need to travel the long distance being I have Tricare benefits to visit local Medical facilities. I was a Volunteer Driver for a 8 months and at one time I drove twice a week for two months being there wasn't other drivers. The trip was to leave on Sunday and return on Monday. The other to leave on Wednesday and return on Thursday.

I would drive from Raymondville to Brownsville, Texas to pick up veterans early the morning 6 a.m. to return to San Benito then Harlingen and then back Raymondville. After picking up the remaining Vets. at Raymondville we started the longer trip to V.A Hospital at San Antonio, Tx.

The trip was not a straight 5 1/2 hours, we had to stop various times due to some the Vets needed to use the rest rooms due to medical problems such as Prostrate illnesses and others needed to stretch out. As you know or can visualized a WW II veterans sitting on such long trip and of course also climbing and off a 15 passenger Van. We as driver were not repeat not able to help him on or off the Van due to liability. The Veterans had to be ambulatory.

Upon arrival, the Veterans would be drop off at the entrance and from then on they on their own, able to walk on their on or not he or she needed to walk to report to appointment for the same day or the next. Most of the Veterans had to wait hours to be seen for just a 15 minutes visit and be release for rest of the day and wait to return on the 5 1/2 trip.

Before departing back to Valley, Raymondville, Harlingen, San Benito and Brownsville, the Veterans needed to be located from wherever their appointment was at which wasn't very simple due the other "many" veterans had similiar appointments.

Yours truly

Tsgt Rafel M. Cisneros III
U. S. Air Force Retired

My name is CPT Martin Albert Longoria and I am currently serving with the 1st Cavalry Division which is in Iraq.

I was wounded in November 2003 by IED that ruptured both of my ears drums and left the right side of my body littered with pieces of shrapnel that are affecting me today. I have pieces that are in my hands which I am having trouble with as we speak to include my calf and thigh.

The pieces that were left in me for the last three years are working their way out and some have already been removed. In the next 4 years I plan on retiring, but I will still have pieces of shrapnel that will eventually work their way out too. While being on active duty I have received good treatment when a piece of shrapnel needs to be removed it is.

However, the day will come when I retire and having a local VA Hospital in the area would make a difference to those that are not financially stable as others. I have talked with local Veterans that can not afford to make the drive to San Antonio because they can't afford the gas and can't drive for some health reason or have no one to take them.

We as local veterans have served our country when called upon to PROTECT IT and DEFEND IT no matter what and some have died doing it. I have served with many local soldiers from the South Texas area in war and peace, but who is going to take care of this generation of veterans. We as a country seem to make the same mistakes from past conflicts in not providing adequate health care for our past veterans.

When it's Budget time you will not hesitate to give yourself a raise, but when it comes to us the Veteran it seems we are put on the back burner for political jargon. I hope what I have expressed helps with this cause that is taking place and I hope it helps the Veterans that have served as proudly as I have. Please remember this when you are sitting at home or in your office. We have served being away from loved ones and doing what is asked of us

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on the availability of veterans' health care in south Texas. It is common knowledge to everyone in the region that south Texas veterans' are underserved as far as veterans' health care is concerned.

The problem didn't occur overnight and has been a gradual process. No blame is being assessed. The time has come, however, to rectify the problem for both current and future veterans.

The south Texas veteran population is spread over a large area with many veterans living in rural environments. Many south Texas counties have no significant metro type area and consequently are limited in any medical resources, much less those for the veteran populations.

This particular concern could be addressed in Congressman's Ortiz's bill which in part provides south Texas veterans be treated by local medical resources. That would insure that every veteran would have access to appropriate medical care in a timely manner. Often, it can take months for a veteran to get scheduled for what would otherwise be a routine medical visit. That needs to be changed.

The Veterans' Health Administration (VHA) is well known for its quality care especially preventive medicine. In some cases veterans have to go to extraordinary lengths to receive the preventative care. First hand experience may illustrate some of these inequities.

This veteran suffers from Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) It's a progressive lung disease with no known cure. Competent medical practices contend a COPD patient take a pulmonary function test (PFT) twice a year or at a minimum of once a year. A complete PFT takes around 45 minutes.

COPD is typically diagnosed in patients at around middle age thereby suggesting that the COPD population is older than the rest of the veteran population. The pulmonary function lab at Audie L. Murphy Memorial Veterans Hospital in San Antonio, Texas is the only PFT resource available to south Texas veterans enrolled in the VHA system. There are, however, facilities in Corpus Christi as well as in the Rio Grande Valley where the test can be taken.

The round trip for this writer is about 300 miles or maybe a bit more than five hours driving time. Therefore it takes nearly six hours to get the test. Of those six hours, more than five are driving time. For older patients that becomes a real issue.

For veterans in the Rio Grande Valley, the distance and drive time is slightly more than doubled. That would mean a veteran and probably a veteran getting up in years would be required to drive ten or eleven hours for a forty-five minute test. That is problematic and raises a legitimate issue about the burden and travel stresses on an older veteran with a disease, which will probably end his or her life.

Another issue is the cost of transportation be it by private accommodation or some commercial means. The valley has an aging veterans population according to the last census data. It also has higher poverty rates. In addition to an extended trip placing unnecessary physical stresses on veterans, it places a financial burden on valley veterans and their families as well. That needs to be remedied. There are other routine procedures, which necessitate a trip to Audie Murphy. This veteran had sustained a head injury, which resulted in a visible dent in the skull. After discussing ongoing headaches and memory issues, the V. A. physician said a skull series or CT Scan was necessary.

That routine procedure necessitated a trip to Audie Murphy. The veteran had no option but to drive the 300 mile round trip to the V. A. facility. The safety of that endeavor is questionable at best. Not only was the veteran put at risk, but the safety of other drivers as well.

There was about a 10-minute wait for the X-Ray procedure and the scan itself took six or seven minutes. A cup of coffee left in the car was still hot for the return drive home. Out of 5 hours and 15 minutes for the CT Scan, 5 hours was driving. The same imaging could have been done locally or in the valley. It was later learned that the injury triggered two strokes as well as a bifrontal hygroma. The hygroma is dead brain tissue that has filled with fluid. The wisdom of having a patient make that kind of drive is indeed questionable. Consider the patient, but maybe more frail making that trip from Brownsville, Texas. An argument could be made that such a trip would simply be reckless.

One other trip to Audie Murphy is especially haunting. This veteran needed to go to the Cardiac lab in San Antonio for a thallium stress test. That's a routine procedure for evaluation the heart. The procedure was scheduled for morning.

In order to make the appointment, it was necessary to leave Corpus Christi before daylight. It was soon learned that the veteran's night vision had deteriorated to the point of making the trip dangerous. That is now a new concern for valley veterans. The thallium stress test is available nearly everywhere and in most communities with a hospital.

The test itself is a simple procedure with an 8-minute protocol on a treadmill. At the end of the treadmill a nuclear dye is injected. Next, the patient waits for a period of time measured in hours for the dye to circulate. Then multiple images of the heart are taken.

While waiting for the imaging in the lobby of Audie Murphy, an elderly man was encountered. We visited for a while. He said that he caught a ride in a V. A. van in Cameron County, Texas. He continued that he got on the van way before daybreak for the ride to San Antonio.

Although the purpose of his visit is not recalled, he said only 15 to 20 minutes of his time was needed at the hospital. Then he had to wait hours until 3:00 P. M. to catch the van back to Cameron county. He said it would probably be dark when he got back.

He was clearly tired. He had family in Corpus Christi. We talked about his staying with them and then going back to Cameron County the day after. We called his family who thought that it was great idea. He rode to Corpus Christi with this veteran.

Every since, there has been a concern about other valley residents who have had to endure the same travel stresses. That man should have never been put in to that position. Whatever services he needed should have been obtainable in or near Cameron County.

While having to make a trip to Audie L. Murphy may be an inconvenience to this veteran, to valley veterans it is a more serious matter. First the trip is onerous, especially on the older or frailer veterans. Secondly, the cost of the trip in some cases could conceivably cause veterans to avoid necessary medical care, simply because they couldn't afford the transportation.

The current delivery of veterans' health is inadequate and in many cases not being made reasonably available. A case for making what would be customarily considered outpatient services available through existing private sector resources should be relatively easy to see and make. A veteran should be able to get procedures as those discussed above near his or her hometown.

A matter not clear in the bill is that of emergency room care. An uninsured visit to an emergency room can be a financially catastrophic. Today, if a veteran calls facilities as the Corpus Christi Outpatient Clinic or even Audie L. Murphy Memorial Veterans' Hospital, the caller will hear a recording to the effect that if the call is an emergency, call 911.

Any such medical care is at the veteran's expense. On the other hand, should there be a VHA hospital nearby or an ER that contracts with the VHA, the veteran is covered. Acute medical care should be available to any veteran wherever they are situated.

Within, the last several years, a sibling sustained a head injury in a fall. Although, the sibling died after a few days, the emergency room and intensive care bill was around \$70,000. Such could be devastating to a veteran's survivors.

With or without a new hospital many of the routine medical services such as stress tests, pulmonary function tests and numerous radiological procedures can be done competently, cost effectively, and with fewer burdens on the veteran.

As far as in patient care is concerned, this veteran would prefer to go to a real veterans' hospital if able. It would make no difference if the facility were located in either the valley or San Antonio. If it were an acute matter, the preference would be the first facility contracted with VHA if a VHA facility were not nearby.

The ability to provide routine medical procedures matters as well as acute or emergency room care should be available in nearly every community in south Texas. That would necessarily contemplate the public-private component of the bill or some combination of the other provisions. Your consideration of these remarks is appreciated.

Claude V. D'Unger

To whom it may concern. Im a decorated veteran who served 2 tours in Viet Nam 1967 through 1969. Im a 100% permant disabeled veteran. The 5 hour trips i have to make to San Antonio for any special needs the clinics cant perform is making my disabillities worse. The round trip is made on a crowded van, and the overnight stay in a dirty hotel is a hardship. Im too sick to drive myself. If you are in a wheel chair you cant ride the vans. Im sadden to see the old ww2 veteran of 90 years old suffer this way as well. I went to an emergentcy room at a private hospital 14 mounths ago and then sent up by ambulance to the Audy Murphy Veterans hospital in San Antonio Texas for a kidney infection. To this day im still waiting for so called due process. Ive talked to 3 differant people in fee basis with the most recent being the supervisor. They all told me it would be 45days with the last contact on April 3rd. Well guess what, nothing yet. Im currently be threaten i have untill April 26 2007 before bill collectors are given the job to collect \$10,000 from me , for what i shouldnt have to be concerned about. My credit is at risk because fee bases is backed logged. So they keep saying. This is a big mess with alot of stress. I truly have lost faith in this v.a. nightmare. Give the veterans what they deserve or tear down this v.a system and close the doors and let us use our cards like (medicare) and pick and choose our own doctors and hospitals. Im not too proud being a veteran cause theres too much descrace and short comings from a broken down system. Another discruntal veteran? Maybe so but it shouldnt be this way. This substandard treatment for veterans in the Rio Grande Valley is unacceptable as it is anywhere in the U.S.A. Please let our voice be heard, we the people, veterans dont want our new veterans to endure these short comings. Do whats right- PROVIDE FOR ALL WHOM DESERVE.

Dan Kerkow Port Isabel Texas.

Honorable Sir:

I do not know if you have heard from any of the family members of the disabled veterans from the Rio Grande Valley that require travel to San Antonio for appointments, but I believe that Congress should also hear about the hardship that the vet's family must also endure. I have a full time job at one of the area hospitals. When my fiancée needs to go to San Antonio for certain procedures, I have to take time off from work to accompany him. It causes me to lose work time, and the only way I can make up that money is to use my vacation days. I cannot let him go by himself whenever they do procedures that require anesthesia or manipulation of his neck or spine. He is usually in so much pain and/or drowsy with medication that he cannot drive. He has a hard time sitting for long periods, and San Antonio is 4 hours away, and sometimes longer when we have to stop so that he can stretch to relieve the pain. A couple of times he has had to go on his own because I cannot take off from work and we cannot find anyone else to go with him. He has had to lie to the staff that he has a driver. Then I am so worried about him driving that I cannot even function at work, and am having to go out several times to call him to make sure he is OK. We also have to make arrangements for our kids if we are not getting back before they get home from school. We have had to go to San Antonio just to get a result of an X-ray or CT scan. This requires at least 8 hours of driving for an appointment that lasts 10 minutes. Where is the justice in that?

I know several veterans that have to go to San Antonio for treatments or procedures; some do not have family members that can drive them to San Antonio or reliable vehicles or they are taking care of small children at home. What are they supposed to do? The van that is supposed to be available to these vets is not really available; it only runs on certain days and with limited space and with no handicap accommodations. Sometimes some procedures have to be scheduled for the weekend; like my fiancée's MRI that's scheduled for a Sunday; he also has another appointment scheduled for Monday for a spinal procedure. I cannot even make that appointment with him because I cannot take the time off. This means we have to call around and see who can go with him. What happens to those vets that have no one to take them and no bus available? Rescheduling appointments can take up to 6 months or more.

I have heard several horror stories from these vets and I think it is a shame that our vets are having to sleep in their cars overnight because there is no room available at the designated hotel and they have to be there for an early morning appointment. And travel pay?? You have got to be kidding; with gas prices they way they are, we barely get enough for one tankful of gas. We have to fill up twice to get there and back, plus pay for meals. How about when these vets are hospitalized up there? Isn't it better for them to be near friends and family that can visit and keep him/her in good spirits? Isn't this supposed to be better for them, rather than being all alone away from anyone?

The Valley has several thousand vets already and will have more when these young men and women return home from our current conflicts. Are they going to have to suffer the same hardships?

Congress needs to stop turning a deaf ear and a blind eye to our situation in the Rio Grande Valley. Our veterans have willingly given their service to the United States. It is time to return that service. How can Congress appropriate money for every other cause except this one, when it means taking care of our own? These men and women deserve better; we all owe it to them.

Sincerely,
Anabeth Molina

I am a strong supporter of establishing a Veterans Hospital in South Texas as soon as possible. Veterans who have to visit a hospital have to travel all the way to San Antonio, TX to take care of their medical needs. I venture to say that the majority of the personnel voting against this issue have never been in the military. I will ask these opponents of the medical facility in South Texas to please take a trip all the way from South Texas to San Antonio to visit a doctor.

But take this trip when he/she/they are in pain or sit in a wheelchair for the trip and see how they like it. I dare anyone of those opponents to try taking this trip! If he/she/they decide to do so please let me know so I can get the news media to cover this trip. You may quote me on any or all of the above statements.

Lino Trevino
305 Beverly Dr.
Schertz, TX 78154

I HAVE SEVERAL CLOSE FRIENDS, WHO'S HUSBAND ARE VETERANS AND THEY TELL ME AND I CAN ALSO SEE WHAT THEY HAVE TO GO THROUGH EVERY TIME THEY HAVE TO LEAVE FOR SAN ANTONIO, IT IS SUCH AN INCONVIENCE FOR THEM AND THEIR FAMILY, PLUS THE COST FOR THEM AS WELL, SINCE THE COST OF GAS HAD GONE UP AND THEN THE COST OF A HOTEL IF THEY HAVE TO STAY PLUS FOOD ETC...

COULD WE NOT USE THE HOSPITAL AT THE CORPUS CHRISTI ARMY DEPOT ON BASE, BUILD IT UP AND MAKE IT BIGGER, HIRE THE DOCTORS AND NURSES NEEDED TO MAKE LIFE A LITTLE EASIER FOR OUR ALL OUR DESERVED VETERANS'S.

I AM DEFINITELY FOR A VETERANS'S HOSPITAL IN THE SOUTH TEXAS AREA.
YOUR TRULY OLGA RODRIGUEZ

Olga V. Rodriguez
CCISD Office of Food Services
4922 Westway
Corpus Christi, TX 78408
(361) 844-0222, Fax: (361) 844-0226

The Honorable Congressman Ortiz,

My husband is a Vietnam War Veteran and my father is a World War II Veteran. Both had injuries due to the war and both have to make trips to San Antonio at the Audie Murphy Hospital. My father is in his mid 80's and it is getting harder and harder for him to make trips to San Antonio. My husband also has had problems getting to San Antonio...I feel they both served their country and gave their all while doing so and they need to have you be their voice to tell Congress that there is a great need here in South Texas to have a Veteran's Hospital. Thank you for what you are trying to do for our loved ones that have served their country because they believe in our traditions and also served with honor.

Many Blessings to you,
Sincerely, Elizabeth Jasso

Elizabeth Jasso
Food Service Coordinator
Corpus Christi ISD

Dear Congressman Solomon P. Ortiz;

I have a brother who is medically retired from the U.S. Air Force. He must travel to San Antonio every month for his medical treatments. It takes a day out of his life and requires a long ride back and forth. I am also a retired veteran but choose to see my own doctors rather than spend a long time waiting at the local clinic or taking the time to travel to San Antonio. It would be a blessing to many of us veterans if we had a hospital here in Corpus Christi or nearby.

I would like for you to know that I am a registered Republican but I started voting for you when you ran and was elected sheriff of Nueces County. You may remember I was an active member of Associated Clubs of Texas (ACT). I have voted for you each time you ran for Congress. I am confident that you can get the Veterans Hospital for us.

Respectfully, Richard D. Hanson

Dear Sir:

>I appreciate this opportunity to give my opinion on veteran's care in south
>texas. I have been a part of the V.A. health care systems in Reno, Nevada
>and Fargo, North Dakota. Both Reno and Fargo were very good. These were
>medical hospitals, not clinics. My experience with the clinics in both
>Harlingen and McAllen are ongoing nightmares. Lately I have been trying to
>simply get an appointment with my psychiatrist in Harlingen. Every time I
>call I get put on hold and eventually I hang up after waiting and waiting. I
>finally gave up but I will try again soon. This is just one example. I dread
>trying to do anything with the veterans care facilities here. I have tried
>to figure out why it is that an area that seems to have more veterans per
>capita than any other area of the nation has the poorest health care for
>them. I suspect a type of federal racism. I cant understand what else it
>might be. The employees in both clinics are overworked way beyond the point
>of laughability. The thought that maybe we dont need a V.A. hospital in this
>area is so ridiculous I feel embarassed for whoever might be thinking this.
>Many veterans wont use the facilities here. They self-diagnose and then pick
>up meds in Mexico.
>
>I am Douglas R. Brown. My phone is 9565794441. I will reveal any other
>personal information about myself if you need it. I am available to talk to
>anyone.

Congressman Ortiz:

We need a Veterans Administration Hospital in the Rio Grande Valley so that we do not have to travel to San Antonio for acute care. I have had a couple of near death experiences dealing with the bureaucracy of the Veterans Administration as it provides health care to us Veterans.

I underwent by-pass heart surgery under emergency basis as a result of a heart attack. My wife called our local clinic and she was directed to call 911 and that if I was service connected the VA would cover. I in fact did have the surgery. I had no problem being admitted, but after my release from the hospital everything changed. Upon release we provided the VA clinic with the hospital doctors' recommend post surgery instructions. I was placed under new medication.

Unfortunately, the nurse which received those medical instructions did not input them into my computer medical records. I was at home without medication and had to turn to a private pharmacists to obtain them. No one at the VA had requested the new medication. I went to the benefits coordinator and told him that I needed to follow up with a cardiologist to chart my progress. He told me since there wasn't a cardiologist at the clinic that he saw no problem if I followed up with the local cardiologist. I did and VA did not pay. I was taking comaudin and had to be monitored weekly.

After three visits, the cardiologist's office advised me of the problem with the VA and requested that I pay up front for all services. I call the clinic and was told that the VA says that I should have gone to a cardiologist in San Antonio. By this time, my sutures had become infected and I was leaking fluids. I went to the clinic and was told that they would assign a home health nurse to monitor the sutures. She was given very specific instructions and was limited on what she could do.

I then attempted to get an appointment to see a VA cardiologist which had been seeing me, but was told at the local VA that they did not do that and I should call San Antonio directly. I did and was able to get an appointment 5 weeks after my release. By this time I was all stressed out and had to see my psychiatrist. He doubled my dosage on my medication in order to help me. When I arrived in San Antonio, the cardiologist did not know that I had had surgery.

She was surprised because she thought that I was coming up to San Antonio for a heart cateherization. She thought that I had a valve problem and was surprised that they had found two arteries that were clogged. She was irritated because she did not have my up to date medical records. I showed her my sutures and she was visibly irritated because they were infected.

She tried calling the local VA clinic but could not get the line. She immediately call the Surgeon's office and made arrangements that I be seen immediately. She reviewed all my medications and made changes. The surgeon cleanse my sutures and told me to return to the surgeon that had done my surgery so that he could follow up locally. I returned home and continued with problems with my sutures.

I was also prescribe more high blood pressure medication. I was taken so much medication that my blood pressure fell down almost to the point that I was fainting. There was no way to reach the VA because it happened on a weekend, not even the toll free nurses number, my wife panicked and called the home health nurse which suggested that I quit taking the medications and go immediately to the hospital. I did not want to go because the hospital had not been paid and I might be refused.

The nurse that recommended that I drink a coca cola with crackers, which I did. Thank God that the home remedy that the nurse recommended worked. On Monday I called San Antonio and told them what had happened and they took me off some medication and was told that I was taking too much medication. (The reason for this is the faulty medical records system.) I returned to the surgeon that performed the surgery and I told him that the VA had send me back to him.

His office called the VA and I assumed it had been approved. He saw my sutures and was very concerned and wondered what the VA was doing. He immediately ordered wound therapy and I was given a 3 times a week regiment for about two months. Since then, I have had to travel to San Antonio to have halter placed to monitor my heart. I traveled five hours, when I arrived I had the procedure done, which took about two (2) minutes. I was told to return in 48 hours. I did not qualify for lodging so I returned to the Valley. After two days I returned to have it removed. Again I traveled five hours to get there. The procedure to remove it took 45 second to a minute. I had to made two (2) trips to San Antonio to be seen a total of 21/2 to 3 minutes. Why because this procedure could not be done at the local clinic?

On my last visit to my medical provider at the clinic I was assigned a new doctor. When I was being triage, the nurse asked me if I had any past surgeries. I told her, hell yes, I just had a by-pass, isn't it in the records. I told her that I even had to go to San Antonio to have a halter to monitor my heart. She wondered out loud as to why they had send me to San Antonio for a procedure that could have been done locally. The doctor and I reviewed my medical and I was surprised that some of the medication that I had been ordered to stop was still on the active list. I told him that I had not refilled those prescriptions. He deleted them from my record. I had to update him on what had happened since my surgery.

The hospital and the doctors that did the surgery have not been paid and I am getting medical billings from them. The fee service people at the VA told me that I could have gone to San Antonio for the medical services. They did not have any records in their files indicating that a VA doctor had approved the medical. I told him that the hospital had called and that they were given the okay or they would not have allowed the services. I told him that I had no choice but to go to a local hospital because it was an "emergency". And since the clinic had not provided post surgery care, I had had to follow up with the doctors.

I am doing fine now. I am gradually recovering from the surgery. But while I was suffering with the infection to my surgery and the delicacy of the operation I had to make two (2) trips to San Antonio, a total of almost 20 hours in a car. The pain and discomfort that I suffered made me think, why in the hell did I choose the VA for my medical.

I have gone to San Antonio on previous occasions to see the cardiologists only to find out that the Eco grams and ekgs done at a local hospital were not available. They were not send up there because the VA had not paid. The cardiologist was visibly disturbed by this and she ordered new ones done since I was in San Antonio already. She showed concerned that I had traveled all the way from the Valley and that I would not be seen due to the lack of the medical being send to her.

I have had to go to San Antonio for other minor exams that took 15 to 20 minutes. The stress test could have been done locally, the allergy tests could have been done locally, the breathing test could have been done locally, and my skin rash exams could easily have been done locally. But I had to travel to San Antonio for them because the Rio Grande Valley does not have acute care to provide health care for us.

Sincerely,
Arturo Treto Garza

Honorable Solomon Ortiz,

Thank you for getting our needs in the Rio Grande Valley heard. Yes we do need a Hospital for us .Having to travel to San Antonio is just so much trouble and time consuming. Sometimes it just does not help, by the time you arrive your problems just seem to increase. We need all the help we can muster.

Respectfully,
Jose Benavides
334 McDavitt Blvd
Brownsville, Texas 78521

Dear Congressman Ortiz

My brother had a triple by pass done in San Antonio Audie Murphy Veterans Hospital in 2005. He returned after a two week stay at Audie Murphy and continued with his post surgery care. During the course of his recovery, he developed complications with a blood thinning medication called comaudin. That medication had to be monitored closely. On one occasion he went to the Harlingen Outpatient clinic with problems.

His VA medical provider told him that he needed to be monitored closely for his PT INR and that he needed to take Vitamin K. He send him home while he ordered his new dosage of medication.

He told my brother that maybe the pharmacy in McAllen might deliver the medication later that day. As soon as my brother arrived at his home, he received a call from the VA Clinic that he needed to go to the nearest hospital immediately and was told that Dolly Vinsant Memorial Hospital in San Benito was taking Veterans.

My sister-in-law drove him right away to DVMH. At DVMH he was told that he was very sick and he was immediately transferred to Valley Baptist Medical Center in Harlingen, TX. by ambulance. He was admitted because he advised the hospital that he was a Veteran and showed his ID Card. The hospital got the clearance from San Antonio VA and admitted him. He was given two pints of blood and was required to stay for four days to recover.

His medical billings have not been paid because the VA is claiming that "VA facilities were feasibly available to provide the care". In other words, the VA felt that my brother could have traveled to San Antonio under the dangerous medical problems he was having.

He barely made it to the local hospital let alone to San Antonio which is 4 to 5 hours away by car. The VA clinic did not tell him that they would provide an ambulance for him to take him to San Antonio, they know better. There is no such thing. What his VA medical provider did do and under an abundance of caution referred him to the nearest local hospital.

If the VA feels that our Veterans can immediately fly or magically transfer themselves to San Antonio for medical care under emergency conditions, then I wish they would let us in on the secret.

Once again the VA is using the excuse that medical VA facilities were feasibly available. The local VA clinic does not even have a cardiologist. VA facilities are not "feasibly available" for Veterans with emergencies and or acute care problems.

This is another reason why we need a VA hospital for the Rio Grande Valley. My brother does not want to rock the boat because of his heart condition and other medical problems which have developed. He does not want to jeopardize the health care that he does receive from the VA. In other words, he is in a sense held hostage by our Government.

Sincerely,

Arturo Garza

Dear Congressman Ortiz,

My husband, Alfonso X. Soto, an army veteran of the Vietnam War died nine years ago. I believe that at the time of his heart attack he was also suffering from a problem with his lungs possibly due to his exposure to agent orange while in Viet Nam. He never pursued a diagnosis mainly because the San Antonio facility was too far and he was not able to make the trip. The one time he did go due to hearing loss from a mortar concussion also while in Viet Nam, he found that the number of people they were trying to serve was too great for quality care. He never went back again.

My husband is gone, but for the sake of other veterans who deserve our support and in light of the number of young men and women from our area serving in Iraq, who will need physical and psychological support when they return, I ask that you actively pursue a facility in the South Texas area. Each time I drive by the old Valley Regional facility just sitting there with no purpose, I wonder at the possibility of a veteran's hospital in Brownsville, Texas. Congressman, I know you are a man of vision. Please do what you can.

Sincerely,
Neida Ruth Soto

Mr. Ortiz

I am a 54 year old Black Female Veteran and I retired and live in Corpus Christi, Texas. I have 60% service connected disability and find it ridiculous and cumbersome to have to travel to San Antonio for visits to Audie Murphy. I have to take off from work for a day as oppose to one to two hours to have a mammogram, an X-ray, consults which take all day waiting, and ten minutes to get done.

I usually have appointments at 12pm which means I must go to bed early enough, to get up around 6am leave Corpus no later than 7:30 to make sure I get to Audie 30 minutes prior to my appointment. Once I am checked in; and I will take my last appointments for instance, I wait for one hour to be called, and another two hours before I am seen. They reimburse me 26.00 for the appointment and we know that does not even fill a tank.

I must miss a day of work of course because it is a full day evolution to get this completed. I work on the Military Base located at NASCC. It has a Large Hospital that is being used as a Clinic. I do not know why the government is underutilizing the facility and requiring veterans from our surrounding cities as well as those here in Corpus to travel miles for services that can be provided right here. This will show the appreciation for the veterans, employ qualified physicians, get adequate services and probably allow the people that have fought for our country the availability to convenience in knowing what some of our brothers and sisters died for was not in vain.

The last visit to San Antonio I was in a room with several other veterans. We all realized through conversation that we were all from either Corpus, Robstown, Brownsville, and other surrounding areas of Corpus. This was ridiculous because some had been there since 8am and it was already 11am and they had not been serviced. My appointment was 11am and I was seen at 1pm and left at 4pm. This was a full day of work and not counting me driving up there and returning home, which by the way I arrived at 7pm.

So basically from beginning to end it took me 12 hours to get to San Antonio, get serviced at Audie Murphy, caused me to fill my tank twice, going and coming, I took off a whole day of work and got 26.00 dollars for my troubles and all of this could have cost nothing but probably four hours of time if I could have used the Hospital already in Corpus or some facility that is comparable.

I sincerely appreciate you fighting this battle for us because it is becoming increasing difficult to travel those miles for treatment that can be completed in Corpus Christi. I cannot say enough that finally someone is noticing that we veterans do not ask for much but when we do it is because we feel we need it, deserve it and it is a doable request.

Thanks for the time and energy put forth for this cause.

v/r

Billie P Harvey, USN-Ret

I favorably support the proposal(s) concerning the establishment of a VA Hospital in the Rio Grande Valley, not just "South Texas".

Even though I am a Retired and VA-Disabled US Army VietNam War Veteran, I have not used VA facilities, other than the Disabled Veteran License Plate benefit. Perhaps I will need their services in the future.

I do, however, recognize and support the efforts of you, and our VA-eligible brothers and sisters, to gain relatively local access to VA care, other than crowded, overloaded VA clinics.

This effort needs to be sustained to fruition even though this may not be the year for success.

Carry on, Sir.

Most respectfully yours,

John M. Lawrence
1SG, US Army (Ret)
26 Winterhaven Lane
Brownsville, TX 78526

We need all the support from you to make this recommendation become a reality. For several years I have seen and help other Veterans travel to San Antonio for their medical problems.

It is time to open their eyes, that we do need a hospital here in the Valley. The Harlingen Area will be getting a new outpatient clinic within the next few months but this will not help because we still need to travel to San Antonio.

It's great but we need a hospital. Here there's too many of us veterans who need a hospital. It's very difficult for us to travel because of our illness and no support for our families when we are there. I have advice those veterans that they need to speak out so that our congressman hear us.

Our vote means a lot and if get together we can have a great impact in our coming elections. Once again thank you for your support and hoping that you can convince the VA committee.

Miguel Rangel

My opinion on this matter is that in the Rio Grande Valley, there is a serious need of a VA Hospital.

There are many vets that because of the drive to San Antonio most of them would rather just not worry about being seen at the VA. For those who make that 4 hr drive is not as easy at it seems.

It is very tiring and the fuel cost, lodging, and food is very costly for those that depend on a family member to take them to their appointments. The travel pay assistance that one receives is not enough to cover these expenses.

Having a hospital in the valley would benefit the vets that have supported this nation and now it is time for the nation to step up to the plate and assist our South Texas Veterans. I am a Navy Vet and hearing their stories of war and their sacrifice that they face each and every day is something I do not wish on anyone.

Mr. Ortiz we in South Texas are behind you 100% and do appreciate everything you have done for us. We stand next to you on this battle and I pray that those who make this decision will hear our cries for help.

God Bless,

Joseph D. Ramos

Dear Rep Ortiz:

I'm a Vietnam veteran with several service related health problems. I've made about 8 trips to Audie Murphy in San Antonio this past year and am scheduled to make several more in the next month or so. My health is still well enough where I can make the trips OK. As my conditions worsen I know it will get harder and harder to make the five hour trip each way.

I see a lot of veterans from the Valley everytime I go there. There are a lot of veterans who cannot make the trip on their own. They make the trip by bus or taken by relatives who I'm sure have to make sacrifices missing work, caring for children and other parents to make the trip. It is a real hardship for most veterans and their families to have to go all the way to San Antonio for medical care.

Americans from the Rio Grande Valley have always responded with great patriotism when our country had called. PLEASE HELP THE MANY, MANY VETERANS FROM THE VALLEY GET A VA HOSPITAL IN THE VALLEY.

Filiberto Conde
Rancho Viejo, Texas

April 24, 2007

Dear Congressman Ortiz:

I'm a disabled vet from WWII who used to drive 357 Miles to San Antonio for treatment but I can't do that anymore. I now visit the Harlingen outpatient clinic and the McAllen outpatient clinic for podiatry. They do the best they can with limited space and equipment and time.

This Valley is in dire need of a hospital or more inpatient clinics to deal with the thousands of Vets from the previous war era and now the Iraq war.

Congressman Ortiz, I know you will your best to remedy this situation, anything you do will be appreciated.

Sincerely

Bernard Reyes
Staff Sargent
99th Infantry Division
1st and 3rd Army
World War II

Mr. Ortiz

First of all I'm not a veteran but i do work with them i was a scout leader and i teach all my kids the importance of honoring a vet. (a warrior) here in the Vally our warriors have given up 3% of all deaths compared to 1% in any community in all the nation in all wars and the most highly decorated in the nation just on that alone our valley warriors deserve more then what they are getting

Epifanio Valdez III

April 25, 2007

Respetable Congressman Ortiz;

You have our support and encouragement. Do us well. And, thank you in advance. Tomorrow, my husband and I will get up at 4:30 a.m. to get ready and by in our way to San Antonio by 6:00 a.m. My husband has an appointment with the cardiologist. He has a heart condition and we have to make that trip periodically. Our trip is not that longer as the veterans that come from Brownsville, McAllen and all those other small towns. Many of our veterans can not afford private supplement insurance. If we have a medical emergency after hours of operation of our local VA Clinic or during week-end that requires hospitalization we are encouraged to go to our local emergency room, but that leave us with the total expenses. The other alternative is to drive to the VA Hospital in San Antonio at whatever time and with a near death condition. The services and attention in Audry Murphy are excellent, but Audry Murphy is overextended. It is a problem to find parking space due to the number of patients they see daily. Every time we go we see the increase in patients and it will get worse specially with soldiers coming from the war. Also, because South Texas is the temporary home for many veterans that come for the winter. Yes we need a Veterans' Hospital in South Texas.

Sincerely,

Miltan Martiz

Rudolph Salinas, Sr. - Korean War Veteran

Vets fight for hospital in Valley

They endure long trips, long waits, lots of red tape to get health care

12:37 AM CDT on Sunday, April 22, 2007

By DAVID McLEMORE / The Dallas Morning News



Brad Doherty/Special Contributor

Veteran Steve Dunn of Harlingen must travel hundreds of miles to receive treatment at the VA hospital in San Antonio.

WESLACO – Every Sunday and Wednesday morning, small groups of military veterans, some in their faded camouflage shirts, stand patiently at designated locations in the Rio Grande Valley, waiting for the "vet van."

Veteran Steve Dunn of Harlingen must travel hundreds of miles to receive treatment at the VA hospital in San Antonio. Eventually, two government-leased, 15-passenger vans will weave their way to the stops between McAllen and Brownsville, picking up the passengers for the 240-mile drive to the Audie Murphy Veterans Memorial Hospital in San Antonio.

They'll travel five hours to an appointment that took months to get. Sometimes, it's for a specialized X-ray that takes 15 minutes. Sometimes it's for a procedure that requires an overnight stay in San Antonio. And sometimes, veterans find, their appointment has been canceled.

On most days, the vans leave behind people who reserved a place weeks in advance or waited in line in the hope that someone would miss the van, veterans say.

"It's a long trip. But it's the only way to get to the hospital," said Ruben Cordova, a Navy veteran with Persian Gulf service. "The buses aren't handicapped accessible and you have to tell the driver if you need to go to the bathroom. People bring their breakfast tacos and pain meds and hope for the best."

For years, veterans in the VA system in South Texas – which at last count numbered more than 107,000 for the 60-county service area – have been asking for their own VA hospital. They're tired of traveling hundreds of miles, enduring long waits for care and putting up with bureaucratic snarls.

And with their numbers on the rise, they want the hospital now. The patient load at the South Texas VA facilities has grown 31 percent since 2001.

"We've never said VA doesn't provide good medical care," said Felix Rodriguez, district director for the Veterans of Foreign Wars in the Valley. "The doctors and staff do the best they can with what they have. The problem is getting into the system to get the care. There are too many barriers to eligibility."

There is also a sense of promises not kept, Mr. Rodriguez added.

Their complaints come at a time when VA facilities are coming under attack following reports of inadequate care at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C.

"We did what we were asked by this country and we don't believe there is any excuse, any reason for VA to refuse to build a veterans hospital here," he said. "We believe we've earned the right to see a doctor where we live."

The Department of Veterans Affairs operates two routine health-care clinics in the Valley – one in McAllen, the other in Harlingen. The clinics are part of the South Texas Veterans Health Care System, which also includes the Audie Murphy hospital in San Antonio, a smaller facility at Kerrville, and outpatient clinics in Corpus Christi, San Antonio and the Valley.

For the more complicated procedures, veterans have no choice but to drive to San Antonio.

The VA takes the veterans' concerns seriously, said Amjed Baghdadi, spokesman for the San Antonio-based South Texas health system.

It's launched a feasibility study for either a hospital or expanded outpatient services in the Valley. And in 2003, the VA received approval for an outpatient clinic at Harlingen as a temporary measure pending construction of a primary care clinic scheduled for completion later this year, Mr. Baghdadi said.

The new clinic will provide expanded audiology, dental and pharmacy services, as well as physical therapy, mental health and social work services not now available.

Veterans groups are glad for the new clinic. But they believe a fully staffed hospital would better fit their needs.

Unprecedented growth

Nationally, VA's medical system has experienced unprecedented growth, ballooning 22 percent since 2001 when it had 4.1 million veterans registered. It now has 5.3 million, including 1.7 million in Texas. And while the largest single group is Vietnam-era vets, the number of Iraq and Afghanistan vets is growing.

The Texas Veterans Commission reports it has received about 2,000 discharge documents a month since 2001.

"Iraq and Afghanistan veterans are a rapidly growing component of VA care," said Terry Jemison, VA spokesman. "Just a year ago, they made up 2 percent of our case load. With the war continuing, we anticipate their numbers will continue to rise."

In South Texas, about 3 percent of the patient load is veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan.

Yet VA projections about three years ago showed veterans requiring VA services diminishing. A report by a special commission appointed to study Valley veteran health needs, said only 10 beds were needed for both the Lower Rio Grande Valley and the Coastal Bend area near Corpus Christi.

Homer Gallegos, a Vietnam vet and a member of VFW Post 8788 in McAllen, fears returning modern vets will soon face the same inadequate reception at VA that veterans of his war did.

"When I returned home after Vietnam, there were few resources here for veterans and VA wasn't equipped to handle the number of veterans coming back," he said. "Now, we're seeing some of the same things with the Iraqi vets. I'm really afraid these guys are going to fall through the cracks."

Young vets are dealing with a host of different problems, Mr. Gallegos said, from an increasing number of head and brain injuries and amputations to emotional problems resulting from the combat they saw and the strain of multiple deployments to the war zones.

"Right now, the younger guys don't feel comfortable with the VA system and they don't relate much to the concerns of the older vets," Mr. Gallegos said.

The younger vets are more worried about "getting jobs, getting married and aren't too concerned with long-term health issues," he said. "I just don't want them to get lost."

More sad than angry

State Rep. Aaron Peña, D-Edinburg, who represents part of Hidalgo County and is also a military veteran, has joined the call for construction of a VA hospital in the Valley.

"What the veterans in my district tell me is that health services to vets is lacking, distant and bureaucratic," he said. "There is more sadness than anger when they talk about this. They want to believe the system will respond to their needs. They gave so much and they feel forgotten."

"But what isn't spoken is the sense that they are being ignored despite the long history of Hispanics' service to the U.S. military," he said. "We've fought in almost every American war and we feel we've suffered disproportionately in the current war. And we're still being ignored."

Approximately 10 percent of the 320 Texans killed in Iraq and Afghanistan are from South Texas. According to Defense Department data, 100,000 Hispanics currently on active duty make up about 9 percent of the military.

Mike Escobedo, 38, returned home to the Valley in 1982 after a four-year hitch in the Marines. But it wasn't until 17 years later that he learned he could get his hearing loss – a result of working around aircraft – treated at a VA clinic.

To go to the audiologist, he must still periodically travel to San Antonio.

"It's not so bad for me, but we have a lot of older vets and people without arms or legs who need more care," he said. "They shouldn't have to spend five hours in a van to see the doctor."

Seeking help

Jesus Bocanegra, 25, a veteran of Iraq, came home to Progresso nearly three years ago. After he was discharged, memories of some of the terrible things he saw in combat led to severe depression and thoughts of suicide.

A friend talked him into going to the VA office in McAllen. He was subsequently referred to the VA hospital in Waco for evaluation for post-traumatic stress disorder and intensive treatment.

Caseworkers there told him he needed to begin regular sessions with a therapist once he returned to the Valley.

"They told me I'd get an appointment in the mail," Mr. Bocanegra said. "Three weeks later, I got a letter from VA that I could see the doctor in eight months. I had heard about red tape, but I didn't realize how bad it was."

Currently, there are five full-time VA psychological counselors and two part-timers for the entire Valley, a VA spokesman said.

Mr. Bocanegra said only three are available at any given time. The veteran clinics in Harlingen and McAllen are closed on the weekends. The PTSD hotline is available from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., he said.

"There's a lot of people not getting the help they need and they're falling off a cliff and there's no net," Mr. Bocanegra said. "The Viet vets have been dealing with this kind of stuff for 30 years. But there's a lot of Iraq vets coming back, and we're not going to wait that long to get someone's attention."

In late 2005, Mr. Bocanegra and two dozen other veterans participated in a five-day march from the Valley to San Antonio to promote the need for a VA hospital. Shortly thereafter, the VA commissioned the study to determine whether a VA-staffed hospital in South Texas is warranted.

"Let's face it. This is a largely Hispanic area that the feds routinely ignore unless they want to send more Border Patrol agents," he said. "But Hispanics have a lot of pride and they're proud to serve our country. In return, we get a lot of promises, but no one does anything about it."

VA officials said the study, later expanded to include evaluation for specialty outpatient care, should be completed this summer.

In the meantime, the outpatient clinic expansion in Harlingen will result in increased mental health services, as well as improved access to some of the services now available only in San Antonio, Mr. Baghdadi said. "The South Texas Veterans Health Care System is actively working to increase access to services throughout the system," he said.

U.S. Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison, a ranking member of the Veterans Affairs appropriations subcommittee, recently pushed VA Secretary Jim Nicholson on the delay of the report.

"Secretary Nicholson assured me that the study I requested in February 2006 to determine the need to establish a Veterans hospital in the Valley will be completed by July," Ms. Hutchison said. "This study has taken an awfully long time and I am anxious to learn the results. Our veterans in the Valley deserve accessible, quality care."

25-year effort

U.S. Rep. Solomon Ortiz, whose district covers much of the Valley, said he's tried for 25 years to get a VA hospital in South Texas. Time and again, VA officials said there weren't enough veterans or enough in the budget.

"Congressman Ortiz has been at this so long, it's gotten to the point he's boiled the argument down to its essence out of frustration," said Cathy Travis, the congressman's spokeswoman. "We want South Texas veterans to get the health care they need where they live. However it gets done, let's do it."

Veterans in the Valley have no shortage of stories about treatment delayed, appointments scheduled months in advance, long waits, and piles and piles of paperwork to receive medical treatment.

Mr. Cordova received a referral for an MRI for persistent shoulder pain. It took the VA three weeks to notify him that he would have an appointment in San Antonio four months later. After a five-hour drive, the procedure took 15 minutes.

"You can't afford not to make an appointment," he said. "If you miss an appointment or have to reschedule, everything starts back at ground zero and it's many more months before you see a doctor."

Mr. Cordova is 90 percent disabled. Like many Valley veterans, he finds that the difficulties in getting appointments and traveling to meet them make it hard to maintain a sense of normalcy.

"It's hard to hold a job when you have to miss work four or five times a month to travel to San Antonio for medical appointments."

Apolonio Uresti is a Vietnam veteran still being treated for post-traumatic stress disorder. His father is a World War II veteran. His two sons, both active-duty military, have served multiple tours in Iraq.

Recently, a late-night phone call from one of his sons saying that he'd been hurt in an IED explosion dredged up memories of Mr. Uresti's own war experiences.

He called the clinic in Harlingen about seeing the psychiatrist. He was told the soonest appointment was in six months.

"You get tired of waiting," he said. "When my sons leave active duty, I'll have to tell them that they will have to fight to make the government keep its end of the bargain. I've seen it in my Dad's life and in mine."

Ortiz wants to hear from South Texas veterans ahead of key hearing

20 April 2007

Steve Taylor, *Rio Grande Guardian*

WASHINGTON - U.S. Rep. Solomon Ortiz wants to hear from South Texas veterans about the health care they are receiving and the efforts they have to make to get it. And he wants it in a hurry.

Ortiz, D-Corpus Christi, is set to testify at a hearing of the House Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on Health regarding his legislation to establish a Veterans Hospital in South Texas next Thursday.

Ortiz said he wants South Texas veterans to send him messages, stories, petitions - anything that will help the Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on Health understand the context of the difficulties South Texas veterans face.

"I know the time is short, but our veterans need to 'surge' now to help me characterize for Congress the everyday difficulties they encounter in terms of health care," said Ortiz, a veteran himself. "I want to tell these guys the personal stories of South Texas veterans."

In January, Ortiz introduced the South Texas Veterans Access to Care Act, which requires the VA to advise Congress in 180 days how they will tend to the acute health care needs for South Texans.

Ortiz introduced the same bill last year in an attempt to get the administration to deal realistically with the massive number of wounded veterans in South Texas.

Ortiz has asked in for the construction of a veterans' hospital for South Texas in each Congress that he has served. "Each year, the bill is rebuffed, mostly for financial reasons," he said. "Testifying before the Health Subcommittee next week will be a step forward for this legislation."

Perhaps one of the Rio Grande Valley veterans the House Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on Health would like to hear from is Ruben Cordova, a USN retired disabled veteran.

Cordova is waiting to have several surgeries to correct injuries he had sustained while in the service. That means numerous visits to the Audie Murphy hospital in San Antonio, the nearest VA hospital to the Valley.

"The worst case was when I had shoulder surgery and I spent the night in my car so that the anesthesia would wear off. I didn't take any pain medication so that I could make the four hour drive back home," Cordova said.

"The pain was unbearable and I had to make several stops along the way to vomit from the pain. But that was what I had to do because it is the only place for veterans to have surgery."

Cordova said he had also slept in his car in San Antonio to make an early appointment.

"By the time I arrived in San Antonio all the rooms available for veterans had been issued out," he said.

Cordova said he knew of many veterans that cannot sit for very long periods and have to lay down while in transit to San Antonio. “Their family has to make arrangements to transport their loved ones in these conditions to make their appointments,” he said. “If a veteran doesn’t make their appointment they sometimes have to wait until there is an available appointment - usually another six months.”

Cordova said people who don’t have to live these ordeals don’t know what veterans and their families have to endure.

“I wish you would live through a trip with a veteran and see what it takes to have medical attention,” Cordova told the Guardian.

“Veterans don’t want a handout they want what is rightfully theirs. We want service from our government without questions just like we served without questioning what was asked of us. We were ready to do or die for our country. Now it’s time to receive.”

Ortiz said his legislation gives the government three different options in establishing a method to better provide acute health care services for veterans in South Texas.

“They can either establish a public-private venture to provide in-patient services; or they can build a hospital there; or they can utilize an existing military treatment facility with a sharing agreement,” Ortiz said. “The end result is that veterans' in-patient health care are attended to, near where the veterans live, not several hours away.”

Ortiz said veterans should email their stories to: ortizvets@mail.house.gov or hand-deliver them to his Brownsville office by noon Wednesday, April 25.

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